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SRI LANKAN ATTITUDE TO THE *RĀMĀYANA*: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

I. Introduction

Sri Lanka is unique among the countries of South-east and South Asia in that the *Rāmāyana* neither has been nor is a part of the living cultural tradition. Nothing comparable to Rāmalilā of the Indian sub-continent or the wayang-kulek (shadow play) and the dramatic dance forms like wayang orang and kechak have entered the folk culture of the country, with the exception of a very late and highly modified version of the story sung as a part of a popular ritual¹. No national version of the *Rāmāyana* as in Thailand, Laos, Myanmar or Cambodia has come into existence and gained popularity². Neither sculptors nor painters have created in Sri Lanka anything even very remotely comparable to such representations of *Rāmāyana* episodes as in Prambhanam in Indonesia, Angkor Wat in Cambodia or Wat Po and Wat Prakeo in Bangkok.

Not only the geographical proximity but also intense cultural interaction between India and Sri Lanka, specially around the time the Vālmīki *Rāmāyana* reached its final form (i.e. 1st to 3rd century A.C.)

1. MUDIYANSE DISSANAYAKE, *Kohom̄bayak Kankāriya saha Samājaya (Kohom̄ba Yak Kankāriya and its Social Relevance)*, Colombo, 1985, pp. 49-52.

2. ANANDA W. P. GURUGE, *The Society of the Rāmāyana*, Indian Edition, Abhinav, New Delhi, 1991, p. xvii.

should have resulted in a better familiarity with the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* as well as its main theme and principal episodes. But this is not the case, unless, of course, we accept the tradition that the Sanskrit *Mahākāvya*, *Jānakīharana*, was produced by Kumāradāsa alias Kumāra Dhātusena, the king of Sri Lanka of the sixth century. All works of undisputed Sri Lankan origin, which deal with the *Rāmāyaṇa* story even briefly in a garbled way are of very date and owe their existence to the influence of South Indian literature and culture during the Kandyan period³.

Was the *Rāmāyaṇa* unknown in Sri Lanka until this time or was it known but ignored and willfully relegated to oblivion? This question merits examination because it is a significant enigma having a bearing on the scope and parameters of Sri Lanka's cultural interaction with the mainland. This enigma is further deepened by the fact that, according to popular opinion, the scene of the main events of the epic had been the island whose king Rāvaṇa as well as his brother Vibhiṣaṇa figure not only in folklore but also in the Buddhist Sanskrit literature. The Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition seems to have utilized these characters of the epic to establish its antiquity and thereby its legitimacy in Sri Lanka.

We shall examine this question with a view to finding out whether Buddhism, which has been the predominant determinant of the culture and cultural expressions of Sri Lanka played any role in moulding the national attitude to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

II. The earliest notices in Sri Lankan Literature

There is no evidence to determine whether the earliest settlers in Sri Lanka, who came from the north-western regions of the Indian sub-continent, brought with them any knowledge of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

3. C. E. GODAKUMBURA, *Sinhalese Literature*, Colombo, 1955, pp. 178, 181, 348. For a comprehensive treatment of the references in literature of this period to *Rāmāyaṇa* story as well as to the identification of Rāma with Viṣṇu and other parallels in Sri Lankan belief, see ANURADHA SENEVIRATNE, "Rāma and Rāvaṇa: History, Legend and Belief in Sri Lanka", *Ancient Ceylon* (Journal of the Archaeological Survey Department of Sri Lanka), 5 (1984).

Coming in the fifth and the fourth centuries B.C., they could have been quite oblivious to the epic which was only gradually taking shape at this time. The Sri Lankan chronicles mention that there were learned Brahmins among these settlers and that they were well-versed in the Vedas. One of them is said to have played a major role in the usurpation of the throne by Pañḍukābhaya and was apparently rewarded by the new king with the appointment of the Brahman's son as the chaplain⁴. Whether such Brahmins maintained any contact with centres of learning in the mainland and thereby kept abreast of the literary developments there is not known.

By the middle of the third century B.C., Sri Lanka underwent a distinct cultural transformation which virtually relegated the influence of Brahmanical religion and literature to the background. Buddhism was introduced by a mission led by Thera Mahinda, the son of the Maurya Emperor Aśoka. Since then Buddhism has played a pivotal role in the development of the culture of Sri Lanka.

Dasaratha Jātaka

With the Buddhist literature was introduced a version of the Rāma story in the form of the *Dasaratha Jātaka*⁵. It deals with the intrigue in the court of king Dasaratha which results in the exile of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa. Less elaborate than the story in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* or even the *Rāmopākhyāna* of the *Mahābhārata*, it is confined to only the "banishment episode". As such there is no reference to the sojourn of Rāma, Sītā and Lakṣmaṇa in Daṇḍakāranya or to the abduction of Sītā by Rāvaṇa or to the interventions of Hanumān and the Vānaras. This *Jātaka* which first appears in the Canonical *Jātaka* of the *Khuddakanikāya* was later elaborated in a commentary which according to tradition was written around the first century B.C. in Sinhala and translated into Pali in the fifth century. The commentarial version retains the truncated story of the *Jātaka*. This needs to be spe-

4. *Mahāvamsa* X, 18-28, 78-83.

5. GURUGE, loc. cit., pp. 9-10.

cially noted because there is reason to believe that the translator knew *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* as it had come into existence by this time.

Pali Commentaries on *Sitāharāṇa*

Thera Buddhaghosa who pioneered the translation of Sinhala commentaries on the Canon into Pali, has referred to the subject matter of the two great Indian epics in two places as *Bhāratayuddha-Sitāharāṇa*. In both places, these stories are condemned as purposeless or futile talk (*niratthakakathā*) constituting one aspect of *Samphappalāpa* (frivolous babble), which Buddhist ethics classify as an unwholesome action. Did these two references to *Sitāharāṇa* actually exist in the Sinhala commentaries which Buddhaghosa translated or were these illustrations added by the translator whose antecedents as a Brahman from Buddha Gaya would have enabled him to be familiar with the *Mahābhārata* as well as the *Rāmāyaṇa*? Dehigaspe Paññasāra Thera assumes that it was his addition, he says: «Thus with the zeal and zest of a converted Buddhist - indeed he was one - he condemns them vehemently»⁶. While this could be correct, the reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa* story as *Sitāharāṇa* is significant.

Jānakiharāṇa of Kumāradasa

A tradition which finds mention in Sinhala literature since the thirteenth century attributes to King Kumāra Dhātusena of Sri Lanka (513-522) the Sanskrit epic poem *Jānakiharāṇa*. The similarity of the title to *Sitāharāṇa*, used in the two Pali commentaries, is quite striking. Was there a special reason why the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* was so designated? Was it to distinguish it from the Rāma story that the Buddhist circles knew from the *Dasaratha Jātaka*? Was Lankā of the *Rāmāyaṇa* already identified with Sri Lanka and as such the abduction of Sitā by

6. *Dīghanikāya Commentary*, PTS, I, p. 76; *Majjhimanikāya Commentary*, PTS, I, p. 163. DEHIGASPE PAÑÑĀSĀRA THERA, *Sanskrit Literature extant among the Sinhalese and the Influence of Sanskrit on Sinhalese*, Colombo, 1958, p. 21.

Rāvaṇa was considered to be a factor which related the story to the Island?

As far as Sri Lankan scholars are concerned, there is no doubt that *Jānakīharana* was a product of the Sanskrit literature of Sri Lanka. The word-to-word Sinhala paraphrase which was the first version of the poem to be discovered and published in 1899 ends with the colophon to the effect that it was the work of the Sinhala poet King Kumāradasa (*Simhalakaver anīśabhpasya kumāradāsasya*). The tradition recorded in the *Pūjāvaliya* in the thirteenth century⁷ and repeated in *Pārakumbāsirita*, a poem of the fifteenth century, goes further and presents Kumāradāsa and Kālidāsa as friends. Kālidāsa's tragic death while in the Island had led Kumāradāsa to sacrifice his own life in the funeral pyre of his friend⁸. Later legend identifies the scene of this tragedy as a village called Hatbodiwatta near Matara in the Southern Province of Sri Lanka.

There is, however, no consensus among scholars on either the identity or the location of the author of *Jānakīharana*. The more complete manuscripts since found in southern India and specially the one with all twenty chapters in grantha script of Kerala, which is palaeographically datable in the sixteenth century, make no reference to the place of origin of the poet. Rājaśekhara of the ninth century has referred to the *Jānakīharana* in a verse which seems to give *Jānakīharana* a place of pride in no way second to Kālidāsa's *Raghuvamśa*. But no tradition of the contemporaneity of the two poets is known in India. On the contrary, the identical legend about the tragic death of Kālidāsa and the subsequent sacrifice of the life of his royal friend had been current in the Karnataka with reference to King Bhoja whom legend celebrates as a patron of literature.

Sri Lanka has had a very long tradition in Sanskrit studies and verses in ornate metres conforming to norms set by Indian literary tradition have been found in inscriptions datable from the seventh century. Sinhala kings had excelled themselves in literature. In fact, it was King Sena of the ninth century who adapted Daṇḍin's *Kavyādarśa* as a pioneering work on rhetorics in Sinhala. As such it is

7. *Pūjāvaliya* (ed. WERAGODA AMARAMOLI THERA), Colombo, 1953, p. 779.

8. *Pārakumbāsirita*, Verse 23.

quite plausible that the persisting tradition of Sri Lanka is based on a historical fact even though the chronicle which gives an exceedingly brief account of the reign of King Kumāra Dhātusena makes no reference to his contribution to literature.

What is, however, noteworthy is that *Jānakīharana* remains a freak in the context of Sri Lanka's familiarity of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The most it would establish is that a highly talented, if not pedantic, king of Sri Lanka in the sixth century had deeply imbibed the norms and traditions of ornate poetry in Sanskrit and written a remarkable poem with subject matter drawn from the story of the abduction of Sītā. The poem itself provides no evidence to prove that its author had known Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. As the Pali Commentaries indicate the story of the abduction of Sītā (*Sītāharana*) had been prevalent in Sri Lanka even to be classified by Thera Buddhaghosa as futile talk. *Jānakīharana* seems to be more influenced by Kālidāsa's *Raghuvanṣa*, which too covers this theme. It is thus my contention that even if the Sri Lankan origin of the *Jānakīharana* is established, it does not testify to a widespread familiarity of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in the Island.

Mahāvamsa Chapter 64 of Dhammadikittī Thera

The earliest traceable reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa* by name occurs in the 64th Chapter of the *Mahāvamsa*, which belongs to the first prolongation of the chronicle in the thirteenth century by Dhammadikittī Thera. In a speech put into the mouth of Parākramabāhu the Great (i.e. Parākramabāhu I), the following are mentioned as secular sources from which the monarch obtained inspiration for his career:

«[I hear] in secular stories (*lokiyāsu kathāsu*) in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Bhārata* and the like of the courage of Rāma who slew Rāvaṇa and of the extraordinary deeds of heroism performed in battle by the five sons of Pañdu, how they slew Duyyodhana and the other kings» (64, 42).

With no evidence to establish that Parākramabāhu in the twelfth century actually made such a reference to the *Rāmāyaṇa*, this statement in the *Mahāvamsa* has to be interpreted as illustrative of Dhammadikittī Thera's knowledge of the Indian epics. He was an erudi-

te monk who spent a part of his life outside Sri Lanka in South-east Asia. Therefore, his knowledge of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, specially by that name, could in all likelihood be traced to Thailand where it, in all likelihood, was a part of the popular literature even at this time.

The categorization of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* by Dhammaditti Thera as secular stories (*lokiyā kathā*) is significant. In this speech attributed to Parākramabāhu three sources of inspiration are listed: the life of the Bodhisattva, meaning the *Jātakas*, with *Ummaggajātaka* as an example forms the first category. The third category is called *Itihāsakathā* and the examples mentioned are those of Dussanta (hero of Kālidāsa's *Śākuntalā*), and Brahman Cāṇakka who uprooted the Nanda Dynasty⁹. In so classifying the *Rāmāyaṇa* as a secular story, the author of this part of the *Mahāvamsa* seems to have reflected the Buddhist notion that the *Rāmāyaṇa* was not history but only a story of secular origin, meaning that it was mere fiction.

Twelfth to Fourteenth Century Sinhala Literature

While it is not certain whether the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* itself was known in Sri Lanka, the men of learning had been conversant with the plot of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story.

The twelfth century *Jātaka-āṭuvā-gāṭa padaya* is so far the earliest Sinhala work to mention *Sītāharana*. In the thirteenth century, the *Amāvatura* of Gurulugomi, quite anachronistically, introduces the following statement to a speech by a contemporary of the Buddha:

«As the stories of *Niganthas* and the futile tales such as *Bhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* (*Bhārata-Rāmāyanādi nirarthaka kathāmārga*) critically examined by wise men, they find it to be futile like looking for rice in paddy husk or hard timber in a banana trunk».

This notion is repeated in the word-to-word glossary of the *Visuddhimagga* (*Visuddhimaggamahāsanne*). The *Saddharma-ratnāvaliya* of Dharmasena reemphasizes the Buddhist attitude to the

9. *Mahāvamsa* LXIV, 40-46.

Indian epics by listing them as hindrances to the achievement of Deliverance. The *Butsarāṇa* of Vidyācakravarti alludes to the proverbial chastity of Sītā when he makes the queen of King Vessantara to make a vow in the following terms: «If I have been as faithful to my husband as Sītā had been to Rāma (*Rāma haṭa Sītā sē mā gē svāmīnṭā pativratā vīm nam ...*) ...». The Sinhala grammar, *Sidatsangara*, gives as an example of the accusative case *Ravulā mārī Ram raja* (King Rāma killed Rāvaṇa). The fourteenth century *Daladā Sirita* records the concept that Rāma was an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu¹⁰.

Vīdāgama Metteyya and Toṭagamuvē Rāhula Theras

In the fifteenth century, two of the most renowned poet-scholars of the Sinhala Sangha had evinced their knowledge of the story. Of them, Metteyya Thera of Vīdāgama was also aware that Rāma had been deified by this time and, in his *Budugunālankāraya*, questions his divine power with the query: «What god was he who needed a bridge to cross the sea which a monkey (i.e. Hanumān) jumped over?»¹¹.

Rāhula Thera of Toṭagamuva makes several references in his poetical and grammatical writings. In a rambling sermon in the court of a king of India attributed to Senaka, the hero of the poem, Kāvyāśekharaya says: «Although the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Bhārata* and so forth, which are full of gross fabrications, are frequently recounted, the wise should know them as comprising the two aspects». This verse is so terse that its interpretation needs allusion to context and other literary evidence. The context makes it clear that the sermon which upto this point had dealt with falsehood refers to

10. *Jātakaaṭuvāgāṭapadaya* (ed. D. B. JAYATILAKA), Colombo, 1943, p. 87; *Amāvatura* (ed. KODAGODA NĀÑĀLOKA THERA), Colombo, 1967, p. 93; *Viśuddhimārga-sanne* (ed. SANGHARATNA THERA), Colombo, 1946, VII, p. 78; *Saddharmaratnāvaliya* (ed. D. B. JAYATILAKA), Colombo, 1929; *Butsarāṇa* (ed. LABUGAMA LANKANANDA THERA), Colombo, 1968, p. 350; *Sidatsangarāva* (ed. MUNIDASA CUMARANATUNGA), Colombo, 2508 B.E., p. 12; *Daladāsirita* (ed. WEWIWITIYE SORATA THERA), Colombo, 1950, p. 27.

11. *Budugunālankāra*, Verse 180.

Sampapphalāpa or frivolous talk which is usually enumerated next in Buddhist texts. The Pali Commentaries on both the *Dīghanikāya* and the *Majjhimanikāya*, as we have noted above, mention these same Indian epics as examples of *niratthakakathā*, constituting one of the two aspects of *Sampapphalāpa*. Thus what Rāhula Thera has done in the *Kāvyāśekhara* is to repeat the Buddhist position already stated in the Commentaries and repeated in Guruļgomī's *Amāvatura*.

In his *Pañcikāpradīpa*, a commentary on the Pali grammar of Moggallāna, Rāhula Thera has a reference to Rāma and Ajjuna (Arjuna) in the explanation that «when someone is said to be like Rāma or Ajjuna (*Rāmasadiso'yaṁ Ajjuna-sadiso'yaṁ*), according to the speaker's familiarity, the specific meaning is appropriately created to the effect that the word Rāma signifies the son of Daśaratha». Apart from the fact that Rāhula Thera has chosen this particular example to illustrate the significance of allusion in semantics, the brief statement provided no evidence on the extent to which the *Rāmāyaṇa* was popularly known.

In his masterpiece, the *Sālalihinī Sandeśa*, a poem invoking God Vibhīṣaṇa to favour the royal princess with a son, Rāhula Thera highlights the only aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story which seems to have had a popular base in Sri Lanka: that is, the deification of Vibhīṣaṇa, the brother of Rāvaṇa, and his worship in a temple dedicated to him in Kelaniya. Vibhīṣaṇa sided with Rāma and after the latter's conquest of Lankā became its ruler. In a eulogy on this god, the poet says: «The brother of Rāvaṇa who vanquished the three worlds, perceived the threefold time (past, present and future) and became a firm friend of Rāma». Nothing more, however, is said of any of the three other characters¹².

Sandeśa Literature

In passing, it should also be mentioned that another poem of this period, the *Girā Sandeśa*, in a description of how travellers spent a

12. *Kāvyāśekharaya*, "Canto 9", Verse 35; *Pañcikāpradīpa* (ed. R. TENNAKOON in *Siri Rahal Pabanda*), Colombo, 1984, p. 235: *Sālalihinī Sandeśa*, Verse 91.

night in a wayside resting place, states that some people were engaged in relating the stories of Rāma and Sītā. The description as a whole and the range of subjects which the crowd of international travellers are said to have discussed leaves no room for this allusion to be taken as evidence for popular recitals of the epics as in the mainland. But the poet takes special care to stress that the narrators were not Buddhists: «Adherents to various heresies, who knew drama and poetry, narrate stories of Rāma and Sītā which they had learnt in the past»¹³. *Hamsa*, *Kokila* and *Sävul Sandeśas* too make passing references to Rāma¹⁴.

Thus these very meagre references in Sri Lankan literature upto the fifteenth century lead us to four conclusions:

1. Among scholars and men of learning, the story of the *Rāmāyana* was known, though not necessarily through *Vālmīki Rāmāyana*.
2. There is no evidence that it was a part of the popular literary property and the absence of any creative work in classical Sinhala emanating from it, as in various local literatures of India, bears this out.
3. The Buddhist attitude to both the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* had consistently been to reject them as purposeless fabrications associated, in fact, with one of the evil actions listed in Buddhist ethics.
4. In spite of this general lack of familiarity with, and the rejection of, the *Rāmāyana*, one of its characters, namely Vibhīṣaṇa, had become the subject of a popular cult and had at least one temple dedicated to his worship as far back as the fifteenth century.

III. Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature

Despite the lukewarm reception which the Indian epics had received in Sri Lanka, undoubtedly due to the persistent Buddhist attitude that they were mere fabrications, two characters of the *Rāmāyana* figure in Buddhist Sanskrit literature in relation to the Island.

The magical text *Mahāmayūrī*, whose antiquity is attested to by

13. *Girā Sandeśa*, Verse 108.

14. *Hamsa Sandeśa*, Verse 112; *Kokila Sandeśa*, Verse 89; *Sävul Sandeśa*, Verse 68 (some editions, Verse 65).

the fact it was translated into Chinese in the fourth century, states that Vibhīṣaṇa was the tutelary god of Tāmraparṇī (*Vibhīṣaṇas Tāmraparṇyām*)¹⁵. What is very important in this statement is that the country is called Tāmraparṇī and not Lanka. While there is some doubt as to whether the Lankā of the *Rāmāyaṇa* story is Sri Lanka, the identification of Tāmraparṇī (Classical Taprobane) is more certain.

An ancient treatise expounding the *Vijñānavāda*, which in all likelihood had some other name, acquired a new title of *Saddharma-Lankāvatārasūtra* (i.e The *Sūtra* on the Advent of the True Doctrine to Lanka) along with an introductory chapter. This chapter was not there when the *Sūtra*, which was self-contained and cohesive, was first translated into Chinese by Guṇabhadra in 443 A.C. It is found, however, in two subsequent translations by Bodhiruci in 513 A.C. and Śikṣānanda in 700-704 A.C. This new chapter which has found its way into the *Sūtra* between 443 and 513 recounts that the Buddha, following a precedent created by the past Buddhas, wished to preach this particular doctrine in Lankā; that Rāvaṇa, the Lord of Rākṣasas of Lankā heard the Buddha's voice and came to fetch the Buddha to Lankā in his aerial vehicle Puspaka; and that the *Sūtra* was preached on the peak of Mount Malaya on the great ocean. The chapter concludes with the statement that on hearing the sermon, Rāvaṇa was immediately awoken... gained insight... and became a great Yогin of discipline¹⁶. While the *Lankāvatārasūtra*, as it is generally called, is the better known, it is not the only work of the Northern Buddhist tradition which associates Sri Lanka with Rāvaṇa. The other is the *Mahāyānādhīśamayasūtra*, which was translated into Chinese in 570 A.C. by Jñānayāsa. This refers to both Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa but in a curious way. It calls Vibhīṣaṇa the "Rāvaṇa king" who came from Lankā and studied the Mahāyāna doctrine from the Buddha¹⁷. While the *Lankāvatārasūtra* says that the Buddha visited Sri Lanka to prea-

15. SYLVAIN LÉVI, *Journal Asiatique*, 5 (1915), p. 33.

16. *The Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra: A Mahayana Text* (tr. from Sanskrit by DAISETZ TEITARO SUZUKI), London, 1959, Chapter I.

17. HAJIME NAKAMURA, *Indian Buddhism: A Survey with Bibliographical Notes*, Delhi, 1987, p. 232.

ch the doctrine to Rāvaṇa, the *Mahāyānā-dhisamayasūtra* states that Vibhīṣaṇa came to the Buddha to be instructed.

No one would take seriously the assumed contemporaneity of the Buddha and these two Rākṣasa brothers. But what was the reason, nay compulsion, for the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition to associate the name of Sri Lanka with two *Sūtras* of which the *Lankāvatāra* occupies a very important position in the Buddhist Sanskrit literature as one of the *Vaipulyasūtras*? A more important question to examine is why this phenomenon should take place in the fifth century.

IV. Why claim Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa to be disciples of the Buddha?

Chronologically the Jainas had staked a prior claim to the effect that these two Rākṣasa brothers were adherents to their Faith. The Jaina epic in Prakrit, *Paumacariya* of Vimalaśūri, claimed to be written in the first century A.C. but generally dated in the third century, presents not only Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa but also Hanumān as converts to Jainism. Here Hanumān is an ally of Rāvaṇa and not of Rāma. Several Jaina literary works of a much later time reiterate this position¹⁸.

Was it by way of contesting this claim that the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition made an effort to present Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa as disciples of the Buddha? If so, why these two and not Rāma himself? To the Buddhists the latter would have been easier as, in the *Dasaratha Jātaka*, Rāma is regarded as the Buddha in that particular life. It could, therefore, be ruled out that such a competition existed between the Buddhists and the Jainas. In any case there is no evidence from either Buddhist or Jaina literature for such confrontation.

There is, nevertheless, a clear indication that some major reaction to the *Rāmāyaṇa* had taken place in non-orthodox circles during the two or three centuries which mark the final evolution of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* as an epic. Both the Jainas and the Buddhists found it

18. ANANDA W. P. GURUGE, "Historicity of the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*", in *Buddhist Essays: A Miscellany (A. Saddhatissa Commemorative Volume)*, London, 1992, p. 136.

important to assert that Rāvaṇa was not the villain the epic painted him to be. The Jainas went out of their way to portray him as a devout Jaina who was a disciple of Anantavīrya and whose pious deeds included the restoration of Jaina shrines. Vimalaśūri, in fact, states that his objective is to set the record straight as regards Rāvaṇa and the Rākṣasas. The Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition presented both Rākṣasa brothers as immediate disciples of the Buddha. In doing so, they lumped Vibhiṣaṇa along with Rāvaṇa in spite of the fact in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, itself, Vibhiṣaṇa turned traitor to this brother and sided with Rāma.

One possible explanation to this development could be that this adoption of the Rākṣasa brothers as their own and according to them recognition as saintly sages was the Jaina and Buddhist reaction to the progressive deification of Rāma. While this could be quite plausible as far as Jainism is concerned, the reaction of the Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition raises a further issue. What was the more pronounced objective of the Buddhists: claiming Rāvaṇa and Vibhiṣaṇa to be in the Buddhist fold or associating Sri Lanka with the growth of the Mahāyāna? It appears to be that both were equally important to them, if the latter was not their main motive.

V. Invoking Rāvaṇa and Vibhiṣaṇa to confer antiquity and legitimacy to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Around the time the introductory chapter of the *Lankāvatārasūtra* and the *Mahāyānādhīsamayasūtra* came to be produced, Sri Lanka had seen, in its checkered ecclesiastical history, the gradual transformation of the initial confrontational position between the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions into one of co-existence with shared royal patronage and popular support. The Mahāvihāra and the Abhayagiri monastery, which were the bastions of the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna traditions respectively, had both reached high levels of development. The translation of the Sinhala Commentaries on the Canon into Pali by Thera Buddhaghosa et al. vouches for the scholarly achievements and reputation of the Mahāvihāra. As regards the Abhayagiri, Fa-Hian in his Fo-kwo-ki has left behind an impressive account of its magnitude and treasures. It is interesting on one particu-

lar point. The Abhayagiri monastery is said to have had five thousand resident monks whereas the Mahāvihāra had three thousand.

At a time like this, when the Abhayagiri monastery with its partiality to the Mahāyāna tradition was even numerically more visible, the tendency to establish the legitimacy of the Mahāyāna tradition in Sri Lanka by ascribing to it great antiquity could have arisen. In the Mahāyāna circles where Sanskrit was the medium of communication and instruction as opposed to Pali, *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* which had reached its full growth would have been well known. Accordingly, they would have found in Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa convenient pegs for a theory of a visit by the Buddha and associate the Island with an important treatise on the Vijñānavāda. To add the first chapter to the *Lankāvatārasūtra* to say that the Buddha preached the Mahāyāna doctrine in the Island is to counteract the historical fact that it was not only a relatively late development in the history of Buddhism but it arrived in Sri Lanka at least two centuries later than the Theravāda. I have no hesitation to hazard the theory that the episodes of Rāvaṇa inviting the Buddha and bringing him to Lankā to preach the Vijñānavāda and of Vibhīṣaṇa going to Buddha to be instructed in the Mahāyāna doctrine could have developed in Sri Lanka itself and found its way to India and China as well as the rest of Asia through the frequent visits of Mahāyāna dignitaries and scholars to Abhayagiri. We have ample evidence for this kind of reconstructing history in other countries: for example, China where, around this particular time, widespread “archaeological enterprises” were undertaken to establish the antiquity of Buddhism through “relics” from the days of Aśoka; more recently, the legend on Wat Phrapudapad asserts that the Buddha visited Thailand and placed his footprint there.

It is equally interesting to note that it is exactly around the same time that Thera Buddhaghosa working in the Mahāvihāra had condemned *Sitāharāṇa* with *Bhāratayuddha* as examples of purposeless and futile talk. It would be really farfetched in the absence of concrete evidence to interpret this dismissal of the Indian epics as an indirect response to the efforts of the Mahāyāna circles to borrow characters from the *Rāmāyaṇa* to boost the antiquity and thus the legitimacy of their tradition. One would also be tempted to continue to posit such an interactive process between the two traditions and postulate

Jānakīharana as the reply of a man of letters who simply wanted the story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* to be appreciated and enjoyed for its own sake as literature. A similar motive could be attributed to Vidyācakravartī, whose mastery of Sanskrit was impeccable, when he upheld Sītā as a paragon of wifely fidelity. I would however not go that far.

Yet, I would suggest:

1. that the popularity of *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* gave the Mahāyāna Buddhists the idea that the two characters connected with Lankā, namely, Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa, could be utilized to attribute to their doctrines greater antiquity;
2. that this literary innovation could have originated in Sri Lanka in an institution like the Abhayagiri and travelled to other parts of Asia where the Mahāyāna tradition had spread.

VI. Fate of *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* in Sri Lanka

Whether it be because the Theravāda Buddhists condemned, on ethical grounds, the Indian epics as futile talk constituting the evil action of *Samphappalāpa* or because they did not approve of the strategy of the Mahāyāna Buddhists to use Rāvaṇa and Vibhīṣaṇa to arrogate to themselves antiquity and legitimacy, the Theravāda Buddhist tradition of Sri Lanka has effectively prevented the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata* from coming into the main stream of literature. The *Jātakas* served as the storehouse of episodes for poets and story tellers to explore for their themes. Unlike in other modern Indian languages, the need did not exist for Sinhala writers to delve into the Indian epics. The Sri Lankans did not identify themselves with the heroic age of the epics. This need for them was served more than adequately by their own chronicles, the *Dīpavāmsa* and the *Mahāvāmsa*.

While many Sanskrit works have had word-to-word translations in Sinhala, and that includes *Raghuvamśa* and *Jānakīharana*, no Sanne has yet been found anywhere on *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*. Nor is there any manuscript of this or the great Indian epic in any monastic library. The few manuscripts that have been found are very recent adaptations of the Kambar *Rāmāyaṇa* in Tamil. The earliest known

dramatization of the *Rāmāyana* by John de Silva is remembered more due to the fact that the theatre was gutted down by an accidental fire. In more recent times, the story was retold for children very briefly by Museaus Higgins and the novelist W.A. de Silva worked on an abridged version. One, therefore, wonders whether the attitudes against the *Rāmāyana* which found expression as far back as the fifth century are still persisting in Sri Lanka.